



Thrills at Heatherley School

BY

J. PATERSON MILNE

Author of "Mystery at Towerlands"
"The Chorus of Study Ten" &c.

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THRILLS AT HEATHERLEY SCHOOL

CHAPTER I

Boredom in Study 4

"This," groaned Pauline Cavendish, "is easily the worst part of the term."

"I know," said Frederica Morley, stretching her long length wearily in the study's one basket chair, "no games' practices properly set going yet, all the excitement of meeting everybody died down, and all the mistresses, from Miss Laidlaw downwards, lecturing you about work, and more work, and then more again."

"Who said work?" demanded cheerful tones from the doorway, and Lynette Connington entered, and flopped down on a cushion which Pauline inelegantly threw at her.

She had hardly settled herself when the last of the study's usual occupants entered and surveyed the trio with a grin. "You do make me feel happy," she laughed. "There's such a tonic atmosphere about you all. Thank you,

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Freddy," as she dodged a book that whizzed towards her, "but I'd rather have a cushion. Oh—Lyn's got *the* cushion. Well, I'll sit on the table, and, if you don't all talk at once, I'll tell you a nice little bit of news which may be of interest to the assembled company."

"I don't think there's anything which could interest me in this, the second week of term," Freddy drawled in her most weary tones.

Pauline and Lynette exchanged glances, and in their turn adopted expressions of complete indifference.

"I don't think we're interested in childish gossip, are we, Lyn?" asked the former.

"No, really, I'm too busy," retorted Lyn, without, however, making the slightest attempt to appear so.

Beryl Norton gave a smothered chuckle.

"I was afraid you wouldn't be interested," she said, adding, "Oh, by the way, did I tell you that I had received a big box of chocolates from home this morning? My uncle had sent them for me to take back to school, but they didn't arrive till after I'd gone. So Mother posted them after me."

Three figures simultaneously sat up.

"Beryl," said one, "you ought to be scragged."

"Beryl," said another, still more sternly,

"nothing can excuse you."

"Beryl," said the third, in tones which ought to have sent icy shivers down the offender's back, "if you don't learn to speak the

truth, I don't know what's going to happen to you. Of course, we didn't want to know about something that was just 'interesting'. If you'd only made it plain that it was a matter of life or death——."

Beryl made a dive for the cupboard. "They're here!" she exclaimed, laughing. "I knew that would fetch you!" and she re-emerged with a large box temptingly adorned with ribbon.

For the next ten minutes there was peace in the study of the Junior Games' Committee, but at last Lyn heaved a sigh of content. "I propose that Beryl be forgiven," she suggested generously.

"I second that," added Freddy.

"Carried!" said Pauline, "also a vote of thanks to her uncle."

"Thank you all so much," said Beryl, in tones of such surprising meekness that they all burst out laughing. "And now, please, may I tell my little piece of news?" she went on, and without waiting for permission, gave it: "We're to have a visit from Sir Somebody Something—I forget his name, but he's one of the chief governors of the school—to-night, and we're to get off prep to listen to him. It'll probably be pretty awful—I hate those people who come to lecture to us, but it'll be better than prep," she concluded.

"I should jolly well think so," said Lyn enthusiastically.

"Perhaps he'll proclaim a whole holiday

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going' properly, and it's perfectly lovely to think of a little excitement this evening to stir us all up."

"M'm'm," said Lyn, a little dubiously, "I'm not wanting to be as gloomy as Pauline, but I think I'm going to wait till I see him before I say whether it's perfectly lovely or not."

"If two of you start croaking——" began Beryl, in tones of mock disgust, but Pauline took up the cudgels immediately.

"Lyn is perfectly right," she declared, "and I feel exactly the same about it. In fact——" and for a moment she hesitated, and then went on with a rush. "Yes, I'm just going to tell you. I've a horrid feeling about to-night, somehow. As if Sir John's coming were going to upset everything and cause heaps of trouble. You can laugh if you like, but I think I'd rather have ordinary prep!"

Strangely enough nobody did laugh. Pauline was so obviously in earnest that the other three gazed at her in a quite uncomfortable silence until Beryl at last found her voice again.

"Well, old dear, don't get all hot and bothered over it, anyhow," she advised, "and besides, I've had a sudden brain-wave about the said Sir John. Doesn't he live in these parts? You know that gloomy looking house on the hill, where there never seemed to be anybody but two or three odd servants? I'm sure I've heard that that belongs to him."

Frederica was looking quite excited. "You're

right, Beryl," she exclaimed. "I don't know how I came to forget that, for my father and mother were talking about it the last time they were here for Speech Day. I remember Dad saying 'Yes, that's Harrington's. I believe he's coming home at last.' Dad had never seen him, but I heard him saying to Mother that he was terribly eccentric. And that's what Laidy said too. I'm just dying to see him!" and the usually bored Frederica looked positively thrilled.

"Well, you won't have long to wait," said Lyn rising, "for there's the prep bell."

"Now for some excitement," said Beryl, leading the way cheerfully.

But even then Pauline lagged behind. "I think it's going to be too exciting," she said dolefully, as she reluctantly followed the others towards Big Hall, and for once Pauline was speaking more wisely than she knew. She and her friends in the Lower Fourth at Heatherley were on the eve of exciting events, such as they had never dreamed of.

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CHAPTER II

Sir John visits Heatherley

It was long since " Big School " at Heatherley had held such an expectant audience. From the lordly Sixth Form to the lowliest Junior, everyone was agog with excitement to see the eccentric Sir John. They had not long to wait. Pauline, Beryl, and the other two had just time to seat themselves in their usual places when the big door at the far end of the hall was thrown open, and Miss Laidlaw entered accompanied by—what? The school, in spite of their Headmistress's warning and icy glance, gasped—for surely she was accompanied by the oddest figure that they could possibly have expected to see. For Sir John, instead of the tall impressive person whom they had all mentally pictured, was small, and thin, and wizened, with an abnormally large head crowned by bushy white hair. Out of a parchment-coloured face gleamed two dark eyes which seemed to see everything at once, and not to be at all pleased with what they saw. And, as though his physical appearance were not already quaint enough, he had adopted the fashions

of a by-gone age: a wide open collar, with a flowing bow, a dark, tight-fitting coat, and trousers of a dingy fawny grey, tapering to an incredible narrowness at the foot.

"He just needs a snuff-box to complete him," whispered Beryl to Pauline.

"Sh—h—h!" whispered back her neighbour warningly, as the hostile black eyes swept round in their direction, and then, startled out of her own caution, gasped out, "Oh, I say, look at the poor infant!"

The whole school at the moment was looking at the 'poor infant' who, at the first entry of Sir John, had remained unnoticed. But now she was to be seen, lagging a little behind him, a poor, dejected child of about eleven or twelve years of age, dressed in garments almost as quaint and old-fashioned as those worn by himself. As it was, however, nobody had much opportunity of studying this unexpected addition to the party, for at Pauline's whispered exclamation, Sir John had darted forward with a sound which could be described only as a snarl, and now stood pointing with a hand which shook with rage in her direction.

"That was the girl, Miss Laidlaw, who spoke just now. I heard her. I saw her. Mocking at me, and my granddaughter. I knew how it would be, but I'll teach you to jeer at me. Make her come out, Miss Laidlaw. Make her come out!" and he stamped backwards and forwards in front of the chairs, in a frenzy of rage.

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Miss Laidlaw was obviously in a quandary. For just a second she hesitated, and then in her most placatory tones she said:

‘Will you come here a moment, Pauline Cavendish? I think surely Sir John is mistaken. I am quite certain that no such thought as mockery occurred to you, did it, dear?’

“N—n—no, Miss Laidlaw,” stammered the luckless Pauline who, white and trembling at this unexpected onslaught, had made her way to the front amid the sympathetic glances of the whole school.

Everybody was watching spellbound. What would happen next? But once again nobody could possibly have foreseen what did happen.

As Miss Laidlaw called Pauline to the front, Sir John stopped his angry stamping and looked at the girl, looked and then stared, and then, almost with a screech of his high-pitched voice, turned and waved an accusing finger, but this time in the face of Miss Laidlaw herself.

“What did you say her name was?” he demanded. “Quick, tell me!”

At any other time the school would have enjoyed tremendously the picture of their august Headmistress being thus harangued, but now everyone was so excited that that aspect of the matter scarcely appealed to them.

Miss Laidlaw, however, evidently deemed it time to assert herself. She drew herself up to her most dignified height, and glanced coldly at the angry little figure thundering at her.

"I must object, Sir John," she said in her most freezing tones, "to my pupils being excited and disturbed in this manner. This girl to whom you have—I assure you quite wrongly—taken exception, is Pauline Cavendish. And now go back to your seat, Pauline, for Sir John realizes that he has made a mistake."

But not yet was Pauline to be rescued from her unhappy plight.

"No, you don't; no, you don't!" snarled the little man, blocking her path and laying a detaining hand on her shoulder. "Not until I've had a look at you!" and then to the amazement of all he burst into peal after peal of laughter. "Pauline Cavendish! Ha—ha—ha! I might have known it. Yes, get back to your seat now, if you will, but remember this, don't let me see you again, Miss Pauline Cavendish, or you will be sorry you ever laughed at me, I warn you," and he thrust forward his head menacingly, till Pauline, almost a tears by this time, wrenched herself free and darted back to her seat.

"Really, Sir John——" began Miss Laidlaw again, but once more a surprise awaited her.

The little man turned towards her and bowed, and in the most courtly of voices said: I am indeed sorry, Miss Laidlaw, if I have caused you any annoyance. I must admit that at the moment I became a little excited. You must put it down to an old man's fickle temper. And now, may I introduce to you, and to your

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pupils, my little granddaughter, Sylvia Harrington, whom I am hoping you will admit as day-pupil to your school."

Even Miss Laidlaw was not proof against the amazing charm with which this little speech was uttered. A moment ago the odd figure had been raging in a frenzied fashion; now in the most delightful of voices he was introducing the small girl who accompanied him as though nothing disagreeable had happened.

Miss Laidlaw smiled graciously, "I am sure we shall all be pleased to welcome Sylvia," she said, "and I know that my girls will do their utmost to make her happy. You will enjoy coming to school here, Sylvia, shall you not?" she said kindly to the shy little form.

But if the grandfather had been surprising, so equally was the granddaughter. She raised for the first time what proved to be a rather sulky-looking face, and looked first at Miss Laidlaw, and then at the assembled school.

"No," she said, in a clear, high-pitched voice. "I shall hate it. I don't like you, and I think those girls are de—de—testable!"

But the sound of so long a word from such a small girl was too much for the gravity of the school already strained to a pitch of excitement quite unusual to it. With one accord they burst out laughing, and Big School rocked with their mirth. Even Miss Laidlaw and the assembled mistresses, after one rather scared look at Sir John, were forced to join in. But, most sur-

prising of all, no one seemed to enjoy the joke better than Sir John himself.

He threw his great head back in the air and laughed—very differently from the way in which he had laughed at Pauline's name—this time with real enjoyment, and several times he was seen to clap his granddaughter on the shoulder, and exclaim, "Bravo!" and "Well done!" All of which, though it seemed to give the sulky Sylvia no pleasure, kept the school going in its almost hysterical mirth.

At last, however, in response to Miss Laidlaw's raised hand, and repeated cries for silence, quietness was again restored, and after another brief and polite little speech, in which he expressed his pleasure with all that he had seen, and his complete satisfaction with the school, Sir John took his departure, followed by Sylvia, still unsmiling and unhappy looking.

He turned when almost at the door to drop his final bomb-shell. "I forgot to say, Miss Laidlaw," he announced, in those courteous tones of his which were almost making them forget the snarl with which he had first greeted them, "that I am now in residence at Rainley House, and Sylvia will be pleased to welcome any of her school-fellows there. And I assure you that I make them all free of my grounds, which are quite extensive," with which surprising invitation he was ushered out by Miss Laidlaw to the accompaniment of polite thanks.

School was dismissed immediately by Miss

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Netherton, the Vice-Principal, and for the ten minutes before supper, the four occupants of the Junior Games' Study sought its sanctuary and gazed at each other in helpless surprise.

"What *do* you think of that?" demanded Beryl.

Lyn gave a chuckle. "Oh, he's mad, quite mad, anybody could see that."

Pauline shivered. "He's hateful," she said, "perfectly hateful. I knew I was going to endure something horrible at to-night's lecture, but I'd no idea it would be so terrible as that."

"Poor old Pauline," said Beryl sympathetically. "You got all the lecture, and I was to blame, for I whispered to you first."

"It wasn't so much the actual lecture," said Pauline, "though that was bad enough. It was——" she hesitated. "Didn't any of the rest of you notice it?" she demanded.

Frederica looked at her solemnly. "Yes, I think I know what you're getting at, Pauline. You mean that he seemed to know you—that your name conveyed something to him? I think it did, anyhow, for we all saw how he behaved when he heard it."

"Yes, and had a look at you," put in Lyn.

Pauline nodded slowly. "I'm glad in a way that you noticed that," she said. "I wondered if it had all been imagination, and I was terribly worried. I felt all the time it couldn't be, for—you'll think this idiotic—for I don't think I can possibly have set eyes either on him or on his

detestable," there was a reminiscent laugh, "little granddaughter, and yet they both in an odd way seem familiar. Well, he said I wasn't ever to let him see me again. He can't possibly wish it any more than I do," and Pauline set her face in its grimmest possible frown.

Lyn laughed. "I'm sure if you look like that, you'll scare even the doughty Sir John. Come on, old dear, have one of Beryl's chocolates, and forget all about it. He's just what we said a minute ago—mad, utterly mad!"

Pauline grinned. "I'm quite willing to have the chocolate," she said, "but as to forgetting it, that's not so easy to do as to say. Bother, there's the supper-bell, and I've just taken a hard one!"

"Never mind!" said Frederica soothingly. "If the Griffin gets her eyes upon you, and you have to swallow it quickly, you'll be choking in a noble cause."

"She'll swallow us—the Griffin, I mean," said Lyn, laughing, "if we don't buck up and get down to supper," and she led the way to the dining-hall.

CHAPTER III

Sacrifice of a Cream Sponge

It was Pauline herself who brought the news to Study 4 at Break the following morning. Miss Laidlaw had sent for her, much to her dismay, for, as she had to admit, she *had* whispered on the previous evening, although she had scarcely deserved the tremendous rebuke which she had received for it. She felt sure therefore that Miss Laidlaw was now intending to add her share to the reprimand. Her face on her return made the waiting trio think that her fears had been justified.

"Was 'Laidy' pretty bad?" queried Lyn sympathetically, as Pauline flopped down on the creaking basket chair which they had generously left vacant for her.

"Oh—that!" said Pauline, dismissing it with a wave of her hand, "that was nothing. She did give me a bit of a wiggling for whispering—very rude and all that sort of thing—but she didn't really say much about it. No, it was the other bit that knocked me out!" and she paused gloomily.

"What other bit?" put in Beryl and Frederica

together, while Lyn sat up, the picture of curiosity, but still Pauline hesitated.

"Have the last chocolate!" urged Beryl persuasively. "It'll help you to get over it. Come on, Pauline, don't let us die of curiosity. The bell will be ringing in a minute."

Thus encouraged, Pauline pulled herself together and, duly fortified with the last chocolate, shared her information with the rest.

"It's that Sir John," she proclaimed, "and his wretched——"

"No, no, 'detestable'," reminded Beryl.

"Yes, if you like, detestable granddaughter. Do you know that the miserable infant is to be in our form—and she's only twelve!"

"What?" demanded three indignant voices.

Pauline nodded. "It's true," she affirmed, "and that's not the worst bit of it—for me, anyhow. She's evidently a perfect marvel as far as brains are concerned, babbles Latin and Greek in her sleep, and that sort of thing, but, worst of all, according to a note that came from Sir John this morning, she's taken a tremendous fancy to me, 'the girl that whispered', and so I'm being forgiven, and I'm invited there to tea this afternoon!"

Once more three astonished voices exclaimed "What?" but it was a weak exclamation this time—surprise had almost robbed them of speech.

"It's true," said Pauline gloomily, "and Miss Laidlaw says I must go. I think she's a bit relieved that all last night's business has blown

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over. Oh, and of course, I've had special instructions to trot Sylvia round until she knows the ropes, and be as nice to her as possible." She hesitated, and then once more plunged on. "I'm ashamed to admit it," she said, her face growing red as if to prove this, "but I'm thoroughly scared about going this afternoon. It isn't just shyness—although I always do hate going among strangers—it's—it's exactly as I felt last night. You know that something rather horrid is going to happen."

There were sympathetic murmurs. After all, Pauline's fears for the previous evening had been well founded.

"It's rotten luck, anyhow," said Lyn, "having to spend your half-holiday like that."

Pauline groaned. "I'd forgotten it was Wednesday. Just my luck!" she lamented. Before, however, anything further could be said, the bell rang for the resumption of work, and the girls had to hurry to their form room.

Here they found that Sylvia Harrington had arrived, although she had not made her appearance for the first part of morning school. She looked as sulky as ever, and sat at a desk at the far end of the room without displaying the slightest interest in anyone. The girls who were already in the room, although they kept throwing her curious glances, were evidently not anxious to make the first advances to the newcomer. There was one point of improvement in her appearance, and that was that she

was now dressed in the regulation green gym tunic which all girls under the Fifth and Sixth Forms had to wear, and she naturally looked less odd than on the previous evening.

There was little time, however, for considering the new girl, for Miss Griffiths—usually known as the Griffin—entered almost immediately in her usual business-like fashion, and next moment the form was plunged into French verbs.

The Griffin made small allowance for the fact that there had been no time for preparation the night before. "This is revision," she announced grimly. "I shall allow you two minutes to refresh your memories. After that, any girl who fails will wait in this afternoon, and write the verbs out."

There was a smothered groan from the form. So that was the mood the Griffin was in! At least half of the girls promptly resigned themselves to losing their half-holiday. Frederica, Lyn, and Beryl, all fell victims to their form-mistress's threat, but by the irony of fate, Pauline, who was hoping against hope for detention to save her from the dreaded afternoon visit, found herself quite incapable of giving a wrong answer. With the Griffin one never had time to think out anything. She snapped a question, and the reply had to be snapped back or one was counted a failure. Consequently, long experience in her class made it impossible not to be out with the right answer if one knew it at all.

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It was a quite dreadful period. Almost the whole form succumbed except Pauline and the brilliant four or five who occupied the back row, and, of course, Sylvia. She, in any case, would have escaped as a newcomer, but to the chagrin of everybody she was able to answer with a fluency that brought beams of approval from the Griffin's stern countenance. Finally, just before the end of morning school, Sylvia rose to the back row, dispossessing Mabel Hunter, who had been sixth from the top since the beginning of the previous term.

After dinner resentment against the brilliant newcomer was expressed whole-heartedly in Study 4.

"I'm sure I don't know how the Griffin could have looked so pleased about the wretched infant," grumbled Lyn. "I'd have given her detention for the afternoon just for looking so cocky about herself."

"You couldn't very well do that," laughed Beryl, "when she was about the only one of us who knew anything. Not that I like her," she hastened to add. "I'm sure she'll be too conceited for anything."

"Yes, and I've got to go home with her in half-an-hour's time!" put in Pauline.

"Yes, hard lines!" said Frederica kindly, "and I had such a good brain-wave about you, Pauline." As the others looked at her inquiringly she went on: "I thought that after we'd gone to the village this afternoon as usual,

we might have had a wander through the grounds of Rainley House, and, as Pauline would probably have been there with darling Sylvia, we could have cheered her up a bit. You know Sir John said he made us all free of the grounds."

"I wish you *had* been able to come," agreed Pauline feelingly. "How I'm to put in a whole afternoon and a tea-party with that wretched child, I simply can't think!"

"Oh, cheer up!" said Lyn encouragingly, "and besides, I wonder if we *couldn't* come to meet you. The Griffin will let us away as soon as we can do our verbs, so we may not be frightfully long. I think that's a topping idea of yours, Freddy. I'd love to see through the Rainley grounds, and it will be gorgeous to see Pauline trying to entertain Sylvia."

"She ought to entertain me," corrected Pauline, as usual treating the remark most literally. "But, if you want to get out of the Griffin's clutches quickly, you ought to be learning some French. Here's a book!"

When she took a gloomy farewell of them some twenty minutes later, the other three were so deeply engrossed in the conjugation of "*faire*", and "*mettre*", that they scarcely noticed her going.

"If I can't say these wretched tenses," said Beryl, as they made their way disconsolately to the form room, "it isn't that I'm not just stuffed with them; only, the Griffin simply

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won't give you time to disentangle the right one."

The Griffin didn't. She was standing by her desk, erect and grim as ever, showing nothing whatever of her disappointment at missing the round of golf in which she usually indulged on half-holidays. Duty with the Griffin invariably came first. However, despite a few luckless mistakes, the trio managed to make their escape much more quickly than they had hoped, and, donning their blazers and straw hats, were soon gleefully swinging village-wards.

"We're really not much more than three-quarters of an hour late," said Lyn. "If we hurry with our purchases we should be at Rainley House by about four."

Shopping on half-holidays was a most important event with the Heatherley girls, especially at the beginning of the term when pocket-money was fairly plentiful. The fact too that school tea might be missed, and the meal partaken of in the girls' studies on half-holidays always caused much thought to be expended on just what should or should not be purchased.

"We shall have to buy a lot to-day," said Beryl. "We all came back very badly provided for in the way of dainties after the holidays."

There was a murmur of agreement from the other two.

"I'd nothing except that cake we finished on Sunday," said Lyn. "Mother had to go from home, and couldn't see to things as usual, but she gave me ten shillings extra of pocket-money, so I'm tremendously in funds."

"Much the same happened to me," laughed Frederica; "and I also got some extra cash. So let's have a thoroughly splendid tea. We'll do our best to capture Pauline and take her back with us. They'll probably give her afternoon tea about four o'clock, and she won't be able to take it, she'll be so horribly nervous. But, I say——" she broke off suddenly, "isn't that Sir John disappearing into that book-seller's over there?" and she pointed excitedly.

The other two were just in time to see the odd little figure of the previous evening disappear through a shop door.

"Cheers!" said Beryl. "Let's buck up, and get our things, and get to Rainley House before him. I feel that I'd be much happier exploring the place if I knew he was not there. Sylvia must be doing all the entertaining on her own. Pauline will be having a happy time."

Never had shopping been accomplished so speedily or, on the whole, so successfully as on that afternoon, and in a remarkably short time the three girls were walking smartly up the hill in the direction of Rainley House. A glance through the doorway of the book-shop, as they passed, had reassured them that Sir John was still there. They had caught sight of

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won't give you time to disentangle the right one."

The Gaffer didn't. She was standing by her desk, erect and grim as ever, showing nothing whatever of her disappointment at missing the moral of golf in which she usually indulged on half-holidays. Duty with the Gaffer invariably came first. However, despite a few ludicrous mistakes, the trio managed to make their escape much more quickly than they had hoped, and, donning their blazers and straw hats, were soon gleefully swinging village-wards.

"We're really not much more than three-quarters of an hour late," said Lyn. "If we hurry with our purchases we should be at Rainley House by about four."

Shopping on half-holidays was a most important event with the Heatherley girls, especially at the beginning of the term when pocket-money was fairly plentiful. The fact too that school tea might be missed, and the meal partaken of in the girls' studies on half-holidays always caused much thought to be expended on just what should or should not be purchased.

"We shall have to buy a lot to-day," said Beryl. "We all came back very badly provided for in the way of dainties after the holidays."

There was a murmur of agreement from the other two.

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his back, far in the dim recesses of the shop, with his head bent over a book, and with sighs of relief they had hurried on. Sir John was not a popular figure with them meantime.

"Gloomy looking place!" commented Beryl disapprovingly, as they at length drew near to the rambling tree-encircled house, and the other two gave a rather breathless assent.

Certainly, even in the mellow October sunshine, Rainley House did not look inviting. Grey and cheerless, with many windows which yet seemed not to let in light so much as to exclude it, so little bright reflection came from the dull glass with which they were filled, it stood on the summit of sharply rising ground, a dreary, dismal-looking building, which somehow all at once the girls felt a strong disinclination to approach.

Beryl, however, gave herself a little shake. "How do you think we should go in?" she demanded briskly, as though determined by a brisk matter-of-factness to banish any kind of fancifulness. "Shall we just walk up the avenue—after all, Sir John invited anybody—everybody—or should we cut in somewhere over the wall?"

"Over the wall, I'd suggest——" Frederica was beginning, but the problem that afternoon did not after all require to be solved, for suddenly Lyn clutched Beryl's arm in a tensely excited grip.

"Look, quick! Coming down the avenue—

isn't that Pauline?" she gasped, and commenced to run forward.

Next moment they were all dashing for the gates. Pauline it was, but not only Pauline. Behind her, with an ominous quietness, but with eyes ablaze, and teeth bared in a snarl, raced a huge hound which was gaining on the panting girl at every moment.

"Open the gate, Beryl," gasped Lyn as they raced forward, and Beryl and Frederica dashed for it, only to hurl themselves fruitlessly against it with something like a sob.

"It's locked!" they exclaimed together, but Lyn did not hear. She had one foot in the twisted iron grating of the gate and was hoisting herself on to the top of the wall. "Quick! a parcell" she cried, and Beryl, sensing her meaning, handed up a large bag of apples.

Next moment there was a snarl of rage and pain, but the huge hound paused. With one desperate effort Pauline quickened her already desperate steps, and threw herself at the wall on the other side of the gate from Lyn, where Frederica was hanging over with hands outstretched to draw her up.

How they managed it none of them could ever tell, but as Pauline sank thankfully on the safe side of the wall, the huge hound, evidently refusing to be browbeaten further by Lyn, came dashing up, throwing itself against the stone work with terrifying snarls and barks.

The mere thought that it might in its fury

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manage to jump over was enough to make the already exhausted girls run once more with all their might towards the security of school.

Indeed, so thoroughly terrified were they that it was not until they had reached their own study that they paused for breath.

Lyn was the first to speak. "The beast!" she said venomously. "I even had to throw our good cream sponge at him!"

Even Pauline saw the funny side of that, and for the next few moments they all laughed helplessly.

"We've enough left to fortify ourselves anyhow," put in Beryl at last, getting up weakly to prepare tea, and then, as Pauline began to speak, she held up her hand.

"No, Pauline old girl, you're not to tell us anything till after tea. You've had quite enough excitement for a little, and anyhow—I think your little adventure this afternoon is needing some consideration. We'll give our great minds to it when we've had a little nourishment."

Pauline smiled a little wanly. "Right-oh!" she agreed. "And you're right, Lyn, I've got quite a lot to tell you of this afternoon, and it'll need all our great minds to think it out. I simply can't understand things at all!"

CHAPTER IV

Tea-party—but no Tea

"I feel a little better," said Pauline, some half-hour later.

"So do I," exclaimed the other three laughing. "Excitement seems to be good for our appetites, anyhow," Beryl added. "And now, my child," she continued, looking at Pauline, "do you feel equal to telling us about your pleasant afternoon? I must say you chose a delightful way of spending it. I just shouldn't have fancied running races with that beautiful hound myself."

Pauline shuddered. "It was dreadful," she admitted. "I . . . but I'd better begin at the beginning, and see if you can make any sense of it."

The other three nodded approvingly, and accordingly she went on:

"The funniest bit about the whole thing," she began, "was Sylvia. You know how I was hating the very thought of walking home with her, far less spending the afternoon? Well, strangely enough, I quite enjoyed both bits until—but I'm going too quickly! She was really quite different from anything we'd ex-

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pected. Not a bit sulky—quite talkative in fact—and tremendously interesting. She's spent most of her life abroad, and it was no wonder she could babble off those French verbs to-day, for she can talk French quicker than I can English. I was quite surprised when we came to Rainley House, the walk had passed so quickly, but it was just as we approached it that the first odd thing happened.

" Sylvia looked round in a queer, half-frightened way, and then she said to me: ' Do you mind if we climb over the wall? I know an easy place to get over, and then Grandpapa won't know we've come? He always keeps the front gate locked, and it means ringing the big bell for one of the servants to operate the lock from the house.'

" I said, of course, that I didn't mind a bit climbing the wall, although I couldn't help thinking it funny that she didn't want Sir John to know we'd arrived.

" Well, we got over the wall without any bother and made our way through the thick trees—and, by the way, the grounds are simply topping—and Sylvia was chattering away quite gaily when all at once she stopped and put her hand to her lips, and signalled to me in an almost terrified way to keep quiet. I wondered what on earth was the matter, but I wasn't left long in doubt. Sylvia's ears must have been more alert than mine, for it was a second or two before I heard footsteps approaching, and

then, while we waited, hidden as well as we possibly could be among the trees, Sir John strode past a little distance from us, muttering to himself and slashing at things angrily with a stick which he carried in his hand."

Pauline hesitated for a moment and looked at her listeners doubtfully. "I—I'm almost afraid to put in this little bit," she confessed, "for I feel it might quite well have been imagination but——"

Beryl frowned impressively. "We'll judge about that," she said, with mock sternness. "You must tell us everything—and more," she concluded illogically.

Pauline laughed. "Oh, well, it's nothing very much, only, as Sir John passed, it seemed to me that what he was muttering was my name, 'Cavendish, Cavendish', and from the way he was saying it he didn't seem to be liking it any better than he did last night, although I was supposed to be forgiven."

"Queer," said Lyn, "decidedly queer," and Frederica and Beryl nodded solemnly. "What happened then?" begged the latter curiously.

"He strode off down towards the gate while Sylvia and I stood watching, not daring to move, and he evidently knows how to operate the lock, for he opened it at once and walked away towards Rainley Village."

"That's where we saw him," confirmed Frederica. "He was in Dixon's, the book-seller's."

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"Go on, Pauline," prompted Beryl. "I'm dying to hear how you came to be chased by the hound."

"Well, I had thought Sylvia heaps nicer than I'd ever dreamed of up till then, but after she realized that Sir John was quite out of the way, she became nicer still. In fact, I began to realize then for the first time what I found afterwards to be the case, that Sylvia is absolutely scared of Sir John!"

"Scared! And she spoke to him as she did last night!" declared Frederica incredulously, but Pauline nodded firmly.

"She is, she told me so after we got up to the house, and she said that she didn't dare to show that she was frightened, he's so terribly queer. She took me up to her own favourite haunt, a little room at the top of the house—by the way, we crept in by a side door and up a back stair without, as we thought, any of the servants seeing us, and I was becoming so used to all this caution that at the moment I scarcely saw anything odd in it.

"As soon as we were in the room, however, Sylvia turned, and I got quite a shock when I saw her face, it was so strained and frightened looking. She looked at me hard for fully a minute, and I was beginning to feel quite nervous when suddenly she grasped my arm, and said in, oh, the tensest sort of voice you can imagine: 'Pauline, I'm sure I can trust you. Will you help me? Oh, please say you will!'

"Well, of course, I told her not to be an idiot and that sort of thing, and that, of course, I'd help her, but she'd have to tell me what I could help her about. And, this is the maddening bit, I'm sure she was just going to, when we heard steps on the stairs outside the room.

" 'H's's'h!' she whispered, and made a dive for the fireplace, an old-fashioned looking thing, and put her hand, as it seemed, up the chimney, but there must have been some sort of ledge inside, for when she withdrew her hand she held an envelope, and rushing back to me she whispered, 'Keep this for me. I'll tell you all about it to-morrow. Oh, don't let anybody see it or know you have it.'

"There wasn't time for any more. I took the envelope and stuffed it into my blazer pocket, keeping my hand carelessly upon it, and almost immediately the door was thrown open.

" Sylvia had darted over to the window, and as the door opened was saying in the most natural voice in the world, 'Isn't there a most gorgeous view from this window, Pauline? That's why I'm so keen on this room.' So, of course, I pretended too, to be admiring the scenery, and I must say it was much more worth a study than the figure who entered.

" Sylvia introduced me immediately. It was her old nurse, who had been with her since she was a baby, and somehow that would make you imagine she was a likeable sort of person, but if she was, she didn't look it. Honestly——"

and Pauline stopped to look round at her friends with something almost like dismay on her face, "if I were Sylvia, and having to live in that horrible house, with those horrible people, I don't know what I should do."

"Poor kid!" murmured Beryl sympathetically, and "No wonder she looks unhappy," added Lyn.

"Of course, the nurse was decent enough to me," Pauline hastened to assure them. "She was a tall, fearfully tall woman, with the grimmest expression imaginable, and she had one of those harsh rasping voices that just seem to cut through you. However, practically all she said was that tea was ready and we followed her downstairs.

"And now comes the funny bit——" and Pauline paused dramatically.

"I was beginning to feel rather like tea by this time, and when at last she stopped at a door on the bottom flat and threw it open, I was quite surprised to see no signs of tea anywhere. I was more surprised next minute when she said: 'Will you wait here for a few moments? I wish to speak to Miss Sylvia,' and with that I found myself inside. And that wasn't the worst bit for——" and Pauline bent forward with a look of fear even yet at the recollection, "immediately after that I heard the key being turned in the lock, and I realized that I was a prisoner."

"What?" exclaimed Frederica and Lyn simul-

taneously, and "Great, jumping Jehoshaphat!" added Beryl, her eyes wide with astonishment. "What on earth did you do?"

Pauline gave a rather feeble grin—it was obvious that she was still rather shaken. "What anybody else would have done, I expect," she answered. "I made a dive for the window, and I was never so surprised and relieved as when I found it open. I think I told you that the room was on the bottom floor, and I saw when I looked out that it was at the side of the house. Everything seemed to be in my favour, and I wasn't a moment in slipping out of the window and dropping the short distance to the ground, but I had scarcely run more than a few yards when I heard a low whistle, and then an awful kind of snarl, and turned round to see—well, you know yourselves what that dreadful dog looked like. I almost fainted with sheer terror," she went on, "but somehow I managed to keep running. All the same, I had seen something else first," and she looked round almost defiantly as if expecting right away not to be believed.

"Go on, old girl," said Beryl soothingly. "What did you see?"

"That horrible Sir John!" came the answer almost with a sob. "It was he who must have whistled to that dreadful brute to go after me!"

"But it couldn't have been Sir John," began Lyn and Frederica together, "for we passed him still in that bookshop," but Beryl held up a warning hand. It was plain that

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Pauline's nerves were not in a state for her to suffer contradiction.

"It *was* Sir John," she repeated almost with *tearful obstinacy*. "I saw him for the moment quite plainly, and then he disappeared round one of the outhouses."

For a moment there was a worried silence, and then Pauline added in a voice of utter weariness: "The rest of what happened you know yourselves. I don't know what on earth I'd have done if you three hadn't been there."

Any reply to this was made impossible by the sudden opening of the door, and the appearance of Annie, one of the maids.

"Miss Laidlaw wishes to see Miss Cavendish in her study," she announced in an official voice, and, then, immediately becoming human, she added, "and, if you'll take my advice, Miss, you'll look sharp about it, for Miss Laidlaw do seem to be in a queer old fuss about something."

"But what——" began Pauline, her already white face looking almost whiter than before, but Annie had disappeared.

Amid encouraging and sympathetic murmurs Pauline also departed for the interview, leaving her three companions to gaze at each other in perplexed silence.

Beryl was the first to find her voice. "There's one way," she said, "in which it really could have been Sir John that Pauline saw."

The others looked at her inquiringly.

"Motor car," she explained. "There is a

back road, isn't there, that passes Rainley House, and I think it's shorter, if anything, than the other. Well, there's just a chance that Sir John either had his own car in the village—he's bound to have one—or hired the old one at the hotel. In fact——" it was Beryl's turn now to hesitate, even as Pauline had done, before giving voice to her suspicions.

"I'm just wondering," she said, in a rather shame-faced fashion, "and I feel it's rather 'far-fetched', but do you think by any chance, Sir John saw us and suspected where we might be going?"

Frederica gave a little whistle. "That's interesting, Beryl," she said, "for I was just wondering the same thing."

"We certainly weren't terribly 'sleuth-like' in the way we peered into that book-shop," Lyn admitted with a rueful little laugh, adding, "And that certainly would explain his quick return, if he had become suspicious, although, behaving the way he does, he might expect everybody to be suspicious of him. In any case, I think he must have hired the hotel car, for we'd almost certainly have seen a strange car waiting about in the village if his own had been there. Besides," she added conclusively, "he didn't go off in his car, for Pauline, you remember, saw him going out by the gate. I say, I wonder what's keeping poor old Pauline all this time?"

They had not, however, long to wonder, for just with that their friend appeared, to make

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the final startling announcement of that already startling day. She closed the door quietly behind her, and stood with her back to it facing *into the room, then, with a white, set face, and in a low voice which she seemed scarcely able to keep from trembling, she said: "Sylvia Harrington cannot be found anywhere. Sir John has been ringing up Miss Laidlaw in a perfectly frantic way. I'm being blamed for having something to do with it, and when I told Miss Laidlaw about how I'd been treated this afternoon, and she rang up to protest, he denied it flatly. Said I'd never been locked in the room, and that it was all a—a tissue of falsehoods, I think he called it, and—" poor Pauline's voice broke in a sob—"I think now that Miss Laidlaw thinks I've been inventing it, too. I'm quite sure she doesn't believe me."*

"We'll soon tell her then," said Fred briskly, rising as she spoke, "for we can prove how you were chased down the avenue by that brute."

"There's our cream sponge to prove it," put in Lyn, "only I expect the horrid thing will have it all eaten, even to the box, by this time."

Pauline smiled wanly, "Sir John would take good care to clear anything like that out of the road," she said, "but in any case, don't go, any of you, to Miss Laidlaw. I thought of mentioning you at first, as proof of what had happened, you know, and then suddenly I had a feeling that the more we keep things to ourselves the better. I just let Miss Laidlaw think

room, beaming reassuringly in answer to the inquiring looks of her three friends.

Mercifully, the Griffin was in a much milder frame of mind than on the previous day, or Pauline's inattention would certainly have been discovered and fittingly punished. As it was, she managed to scribble a note and pass it along to her three friends, causing them to turn round and beam with relieved glances in their turn.

"Sir John has just rung up to say that he regrets it was all a misunderstanding. Sylvia is all right, but has caught a severe chill, and won't be back to school this week. Lady's pretty mad—about the misunderstanding, I mean—but she was frightfully decent to me," read the note which, not unnaturally, brought a great deal of comfort to the girls who read it. There was, however, a limit even to the Griffin's good humour that morning.

Beryl had been the last to receive the note and, relieved though she was by its contents, her keen mind was already worrying over the strangeness of the whole matter. As a result, she was utterly oblivious of Julius Caesar's landing in Britain—the bare bones of which account the Griffin was at that moment trying to fill out as realistically as possible.

"You can just imagine the scene, girls," she was saying enthusiastically. "Caesar's ships at anchor in the bay, and those half-savage men, besmeared with wood, as Caesar

CHAPTER V

Beryl—Sleuth

Pauline was heavy-eyed next morning as though she had spent a sleepless night. Indeed, all four girls showed signs of strain, and their eyes turned immediately, as they entered their form room, to the desk at which Sylvia should have sat, but, as they had expected, it was unoccupied. No one else seemed to have heard anything about her disappearance, and the four deemed it wiser to keep the news to themselves, so that lessons proceeded as usual. Not long after the commencement of school, however, Pauline was again summoned to Miss Laidlaw's study, this time by James, a small boy-of-all-work, who always looked as if he enjoyed bringing terrifying messages of this kind tremendously.

"Cheer up, Miss!" he said encouragingly to Pauline, who naturally was looking the picture of misery, and was wondering what was going to happen now. "She don't look in too bad a wax!"

To her relief, Pauline found this to be true, and in a few moments she was back in her form

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"You can just imagine the scene, girls," she was saying enthusiastically. "Cæsar's ships at anchor in the bay, and those half-savage men, besmeared with woad, as Cæsar

"That's my brother, miss," the girl explained with a touch of pride. "He'll be going to drive home Sir John Harrington from Dixon's, the bookseller's. He does that every afternoon."

Beryl pricked up her ears, and recklessly ordered half a dozen doughnuts to prolong the conversation. This at least was worthy of Sherlock. "Hasn't Sir John a car of his own?" she queried conversationally.

"He's got a new one coming next week, but until then the hotel one is to be kept at his disposal. And a pretty penny Jim says they will charge him for it, and him never using it except this once in the day. At least, miss, I'm wrong slightly," the girl continued, evidently proud at being able to give so much 'inside information', "he may be going to use it more now, for he did yesterday. After Jim brought him home he sent Jim away, saying he'd be using the car himself during the evening, but he'd drive himself."

"And did he?" asked Beryl, remembering that no piece of information was too trivial for a detective.

"To be sure he did, miss," the girl assured her earnestly. "You remember there was a heavy shower towards evening. Well, he must have had it out then, for what a cleaning Jim said he had to give it this morning! He'd been saying up till then it was a fair picnic of a job, but I think he's changed his opinion a bit now, miss!"

CHAPTER VI

A Blazer in Demand

Lyn, Pauline, and Frederica eyed Beryl with something like admiration akin to envy as she spread out her tempting purchase before them. It had been rather difficult to ignore school tea without arousing awkward inquiries as to the state of their health, when they seemed so indisposed for eating. However, the Griffin had merely cast a searching glance at their obviously healthy countenances, and remarked: "I suppose you girls must have been eating between meals again," and paid no more attention to them.

"I'm starving," said Lyn, helping herself to a doughnut.

"Ravenous!" commented Pauline, adding, "How clever it was of you, Beryl, to think of the cream sponge, after yesterday's disappointment!"

Beryl's face grew hot when she remembered how nearly she had forgotten all about everything, but she was saved from reply by Frederica's languid voice cutting in.

"We must remember about the cream sponge-box to-night," she said.

Beryl looked at her inquiringly. "Of course, you don't know about our plans," said

Frederica. She looked at the other two. "I think Beryl should give us a quick account of what she's been up to this afternoon first, and then we'll tell her what we've been thinking," she suggested, adding with an amused look at the now rapidly emptying plates: "She seems to have had a pretty good time. I'm never so lucky when the Griffin keeps me in for extra work!"

Beryl grinned. "*I was* lucky," she admitted, "in more ways than one," and forthwith plunged into an account of her adventures of the afternoon.

"Good old Sherlock!" applauded Lyn when she stopped. "Not that I see just at the moment that it helps us tremendously."

"N-n-no!" said Pauline dubiously, "except that it shows that Sir John is still worrying about *me*. Though why on earth—I can't imagine. I'm glad the girl in the bookshop didn't enlighten him at all, although, of course, you weren't me, anyhow," she concluded ungrammatically.

"It proves, too, doesn't it, that it could certainly have been Sir John yesterday who set that dreadful dog after Pauline—I mean if he'd come round by the back road to Rainley House just after four, as he must have?" said Beryl. "I wonder where he drove when he was using the car last night," she continued; "not that I suppose it would make much difference if we did know," she ended with a laugh.

"But why do you think Sylvia has disappeared, then—if it were all a made-up story?" inquired Beryl curiously.

"I—I admit it's more 'feeling' than anything else," Pauline conceded; "but somehow I feel Sylvia hasn't got that bad chill she's supposed to have. I think she's just being kept out of the way. Anyhow, that's what we're going to put to the test," she concluded.

Once more Beryl's expression was question enough.

"We think the best thing will be to call and inquire how she's keeping," Pauline explained, "ask to see her, if we can possibly get the chance, and pick up any information we can while we're at it."

Beryl looked doubtful. "What about the dog?" she demurred, "and, in any case, when do you intend going?"

"I was waiting for that," chuckled Frederica; "but you know, Beryl, you're not the only one who can get a pass. Pauline braved the lion in her den—Laidy, I mean—and wheedled a pass out of her to escape prep, provided that she takes a friend with her, and that she's back by a quarter to eight. And I"—Frederica finished triumphantly—"am the friend."

Beryl's face fell, and she looked disconsolately at Lyn. "Can't be in everything," said the latter soothingly. "We shall just have to carry on in their absence. You never know what little excitement may turn up."

Lyn, although she was quite unaware of it, was speaking much more prophetically than anyone could have imagined.

Frederica and Pauline set off in the high spirits to inquire for the invalid whom they did not believe to be an invalid; Frederica declared chiefly as an encouragement to Pauline, they couldn't possibly set the dog upon them this time at Rainley House, if they rang the bell and entered as proper visitors. Meanwhile Lyn and Beryl were left to store away the odd buns and biscuits which remained. Suddenly Lyn stopped with a little squeal of excitement, and waved a chocolate biscuit frantically in the air.

"Do you know what we've forgotten, Beryl?" she demanded. "And I bet Pauline has, too—she hasn't said a word more about it, anyhow."

"About what?" asked Beryl rather crossly—she was feeling just a little sore that she and Lyn were being perforce left out of the visit to Rainley House.

"Why—that envelope—the one that Sylvia gave her, you remember, begging her to take care of it. It'll be in Pauline's blazer pocket still, I'm certain. Come on, I'm going to sneak up to the dorm to see. Pauline's got on her coat to-night, so her blazer'll be there," and Lyn, in the grip of intense excitement led the way cautiously upstairs.

The dormitory floor, at that hour, was

forbidden territory, but the girls' luck held. No one seemed to be about, and cautiously they pushed the door open, only to dart back with surprise. There was a scuffle of darting footsteps in the room, and then the sound of a door at the far end closing softly, and after that—silence.

Beryl and Lyn faced each other shakily.

"Who could it be? Did you see anybody?" the former whispered anxiously.

Lyn did not reply. Instead, she once more edged the door cautiously ajar and peered in, and this time there was no sound of any kind. Slightly reassured Beryl followed and together they tiptoed along the silent room, keeping a wary eye on the door at the far end—a door leading to the mistresses' corridor, and used only at night by the mistress on duty. Usually it was kept locked through the day.

Lyn, however, determined to leave nothing to chance, tiptoed right up to it and tried it. With a worried frown she turned and shook her head to Beryl. Whoever had slipped out that way had turned the key on the other side. It was an unpleasant moment. Possibly on the other side of the door, the figure was still standing, ready to pounce on them at any moment, Lyn resolutely put the thought from her, with the reflection that the figure had not seemed any more anxious to be detected than themselves.

Signalling to Beryl she tiptoed back in the

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direction of Pauline's cubicle, and saw to her relief that the blazer, in quest of which they had come, was lying carelessly on the chair. It was the work of a moment to dart up to it and feel in the pockets; but it was, in any case, a moment wasted. Lyn turned a face almost comical in its dismay to Beryl. "Gone!" she whispered tragically. "Pauline must have hidden it somewhere for safety."

The journey downstairs was accomplished without incident, but Beryl heaved a sigh of relief when once again they reached the safety of the study. Lyn, on the other hand, seemed considerably more worried, now that she had had a minute or two for reflection.

"I hope," she said, in perplexed tones, "that Pauline *did* hide that envelope, for——" she broke off with an apologetic little laugh. "I'm going to say the most absolutely idiotic thing, Beryl, so don't burst out laughing."

Beryl reassured her.

"Well," Lyn demanded, "did you catch sight at all of the figure in the dormitory?"

Beryl shook her head. "No, I was behind you, you see," she explained.

"Well, I did," said Lyn, with almost a touch of defiance; "and it wasn't one of the mistresses, as it should have been, when that door was being used, it was a girl's figure, and——" here Lyn's voice sank to an impressive undertone, "Beryl, if it wasn't Sylvia Harrington, I'll—I'll eat my hat!"

Beryl simply gazed her astonishment at this announcement. Words seemed to fail her.

"And what's more," Lyn continued, "I'm as sure as can be that she was over at Pauline's cubicle just as we were, and I think for the same reason. Only," Lyn's voice now had a touch of bitterness, "she had the luck to be there first."

"But why on earth should she take away the envelope, when she gave it to Pauline to keep for her?" demanded Beryl weakly, finding her tongue at last.

"Why on earth should any of it be happening at all?" retorted Lyn with a worried laugh. "Oh, I do wish Pauline and Freddy were back, so that we'd know if Pauline had left it in her pocket."

But just at that moment, had they known it, Pauline and Freddy were very far from being back. Their evening's adventure was proving much more adventurous than anything they had bargained for.

CHAPTER VII

Two inquire for an Invalid

Frederica had been thinking hard before she set out with Pauline for the visit to Rainley, and, as they walked briskly along the road, she decided that it was a case of now or never.

"Look here, Pauline," she said, pausing a moment in her stride, "have you the faintest, teeniest, weeniest idea of why Sir John is so interested in you?"

Pauline looked at her squarely, and then flushed slightly.

"I—I don't know, Fred," she answered in troubled tones. "Somewhere at the back of my mind there seems to be something that I'm trying to remember, something that I feel would clear up this mysterious interest in me. But I can't get it. I've thought and thought, but it refuses to come."

Frederica nodded. "That at least is hopeful," she admitted. "There's no doubt you're mixed up in something or other—the way you've been treated both times you've had anything to do with those Harringtons, and I do feel we're entitled to try to get to the bottom of it. Besides, I admit, though I'm not quite sure that I

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trust that kid, Sylvia Harrington, so completely as you do, that she looks most unhappy; and, if our investigations are going to help her, so much the better."

By this time they had resumed their brisk walk, and Pauline nodded readily.

"I feel like that, too," she said. "We've really very little to go upon, and yet everything has been mysterious up to a point. But here we are anyhow, at the forbidding gates. Do we just ring boldly as we planned?"

Frederica did not bother to reply. She stepped boldly up to the heavy iron gateway, and seizing the old-fashioned, heavy bell, pulled it vigorously.

"Now," she said, with a satisfied look, "I suppose all we have to do is to wait for a moment, and they'll open before our eyes."

They waited.

One minute passed—five—seven—and still the heavy gates showed no signs of opening. During the time Frederica had rung twice again, but at the end of ten minutes it was obvious that no response was going to be made to them.

By this time Frederica was thoroughly angry. "What sort of people are they?" she demanded haughtily. "It's only common decency to answer when people ring."

"I—I don't suppose the gates would open if we touched them," suggested Pauline rather timidly.

"Not likely!" snapped her friend, giving

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them a push, only to utter a little cry of surprise, for without offering the slightest resistance the double gates swung open.

Frederica looked worried. "Now, I wonder if they've been like that all the time," she muttered, "or if somebody really did operate them from the house when we rang. What idiots we were not to try them first of all!"

"Never mind," put in Pauline soothingly, "we intended to go up just like ordinary visitors, and we've certainly given them good warning of our coming. Come on, Fred, surely we can go to inquire for a school chum!"

Leaving the gates open to their widest extent the two girls made their way up the avenue. It was not a very pleasant walk, for trees lined their way on both sides, and both of them, though they discreetly refrained from mentioning it, could not help thinking of the huge grey dog which once before they had seen in this very part.

Mercifully, it was not a long approach. A bend in it disclosed the house, standing gloomy and aloof, in an open space among the surrounding trees.

It needed all the girls' confidence to approach, but approach they did, making their way up the wide stairs and ringing the bell, which they could hear pealing lustily inside.

There could be no doubt that their presence at the door must be known this time, whatever had happened at the gates.

and then, as again minute after minute passed without any answer being made to their cry, the girls looked at each other uneasily. Could it be that this great, dark, silent house was really empty, or was there even now somebody peering at them from those malevolent-looking windows? Once more anger in Frederica was the predominating feeling. She gave the bell another angry tug, and together they listened to its clanging notes echoing inside. Trembling now in case the door should suddenly be opened, they stood ready to take to a long flight on the slightest provocation. But they had no need to fear. Nothing happened, and the house remained as silent and deserted as before.

It was Pauline now who made the first move. They had descended the steps, and were standing resolutely on the embankment which sloped down to a rugged and ill-kept lawn.

"Let's pretend to go away," she whispered hurriedly to her friend; "and then we'll cut back, and I'll see if, by any chance, the back staircase is open—the one by which Sylvia took me up, you remember."

Frederica nodded understandingly, and together, as if giving up all thought now of being admitted, they strode off down the avenue.

Once out of sight of the house, however, they hid in among the trees and doubled back, making their way this time in a wide circle towards the back of the house.

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It did not take long, and, after a cautious survey, Pauline led the way out, and approached a door in the back of the house. Cautiously she tried the handle, and, considerably to the surprise—perhaps a little to their disappointment, for it definitely committed them to further exploration—the door opened readily exposing a narrow wooden staircase. There was nothing for it but to go up. "I'm going to see if Sylvia's in that room at the top, or in her own room on the lower flat," Pauline declared "for, if she's not, then we know definitely that Sir John has not been telling the truth, and the sooner Miss Laidlaw knows about it the better."

By this time they had reached the second storey, and Pauline tiptoed to a door and opened it. A moment's glance was sufficient to show that it was unoccupied, and the dust lay so thickly on the furniture that it had obviously not been entered for a day or two. Pauline shut the door without comment, and proceeded to the higher flight.

There again disappointment awaited them. In the little room, where Sylvia had talked to her so oddly, and had just been on the point of telling her at least a part of the mystery, Pauline could find no trace of the girl. It was a particularly bare little place, with not a picture on the walls to brighten them, scarcely a chair indeed on which to sit. There was certainly nothing there to linger for.

A sudden thought, however, struck Pauline,

and she darted over to the fireplace, even as she had seen Sylvia do, and thrust her hand up the chimney, giving a little cry of excitement as her fingers met with a jutting-out ridge and—yes!—with something else. Her trembling fingers fastened on a folded slip of paper which she drew out and brought over to the window where Frederica was peering anxiously downwards.

Both girls, however, uttered an exclamation as they examined the slip, for in girlish handwriting was written. "For Pauline Cavendish, if she should come to look for me."

So Sylvia *had* disappeared, and had anticipated that they would look for her! With hands that she could not keep from trembling Pauline unfolded the paper. Its contents were brief, and far from satisfactory:

"I dare not tell you where I am being taken—it would lead you into further trouble—but I shall be all right. Don't worry. Don't let the envelope I gave you out of your keeping—it is terribly important for you as well as me"—Pauline started guiltily as she read that—"and if you can get a chance as you go out, look at the third picture from the left on the right-hand side of the hall. Sylvia." That was all—more mystifying than ever.

"Come on!" said Frederica briefly. "We can at least have a look at that—it's obvious there's nobody here, anyway."

Nodding agreement Pauline followed, and

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still cautiously but with hearts beating rapidly now, more from excitement than fear, they made their way downstairs, and Pauline, who remembered the geography of the house fairly well, pointed forward:

"That door there," she said, "must lead into the front hall. This"—and she pointed to a passage on the right—"is where I was led down. Forward, stout fellal!"

Thus encouraged, Frederica turned the handle of the door indicated. As they had surmised, it led to the front hall, a long and spacious stretch, thickly carpeted, and dimly lighted through the glass panelling of the heavy door.

"Third from the left on the right-hand side," murmured Pauline excitedly, as they tiptoed forward with eyes scanning oil-paintings of, they supposed, dead and gone Harringtons. "This'll be the one," she began, only to break off with a little cry of disappointment. "Oh, Fred, look—it's gone—there's no picture there!"

Dumbly they stared at the heavy gilt frame. Sure enough, Pauline had spoken the truth—the picture, whatever it had been, had been removed.

"It's maddening!" Pauline said at last, with a hint almost of tears in her voice. "Just when we think we're going to strike something definite—something unlooked for happens. What do we do now, Fred?"

Frederica looked at her watch. "I'm afraid there's nothing for it but to get back to school,"

she said disconsolately. "Miss Laidlaw said a quarter to eight, you know."

Once more the girls turned to make their way to the back door through which they had come, when Frederica, almost from force of habit—Miss Laidlaw was such a tremendous stickler for tidiness—stooped and picked up a slip of paper which lay on the polished wood at the edge of the rug.

It proved to be folded and was obviously very old—so yellowed was it in colour. Frederica unfolded it and then almost dropped it again in surprise.

"A clue at last!" she exclaimed triumphantly, handing it over to Pauline. "Now we know there really is a connexion. Come on, Pauline, the sooner we get out of here and investigate the better."

Together they made their way to the back door, both in their own minds thinking how awful it would be if it were locked, but no—up till then fortune was with them.

From then onwards, however, luck entirely failed.

They were no sooner outside than there came the sound of a motor approaching—the noise made it obvious that it was the ancient Ford—and it was evident too that it was coming by the back road and would soon be on them. Simultaneously, with that too came a wicked snarl, and they turned to see the huge grey dog dashing towards them.

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The sensible thing to do would have been to dart back into the house, but fear for the moment robbed them of their wits.

"Quick, that tool-shed door is open!" gasped Pauline, "and together they made a dive for the opening, reaching it just in time to pull-to the door, as the dog threw its great body against it."

They realized their stupidity immediately. It would be impossible now to escape detection, and it was! Between the dog's barks and snarls they heard the car draw up and a voice—obviously Sir John's—calling authoritatively to the dog: "Down, sir, down! Take him away to his kennel, Black."

Next moment the tool-shed door was thrown open, and the two girls crept ignominiously forth, noting, however, with relief that the dog was now being led away quite peaceably by a man who seemed to have it under complete control.

Frederica had made up her mind rapidly to explain that they had called to ask for Sylvia, but receiving no reply at the front door had come round to see if they could see any of the servants at the back, and had been attacked by the dog and driven to seek refuge in the tool-shed. All of which seemed to her quite justifiable, considering the strange way in which they had been treated. Unfortunately, Sir John's first words knocked her plausible story completely on the head. It was so obvious that he knew all about them!

"Miss Cavendish, I see," he said, "and a

friend, possibly the young lady who was so interested in me in the book-shop yesterday?"

"No—it isn't," put in Frederica defiantly, but he went on unheeding.

"I trust you have enjoyed your—shall we say 'trip of exploration'—through my house to-night? I saw you at the beginning, but I felt I should not like to deprive you of seeing through it. Now, however, I must ask you to let me have the pleasure of your company a little longer while I 'phone your Headmistress about this intrusion."

The girls grew red. Certainly Miss Laidlaw, not knowing all the circumstances, would be very far from approving their actions.

Frederica looked round. The dreadful dog had disappeared.

"Bolt!" she gasped suddenly to Pauline, giving her sleeve a little tug.

Pauline almost lost her balance with surprise, but grasped the situation immediately. Next moment they were racing down the avenue as quickly as their legs could carry them—not halting indeed, or meeting with any obstacle till they were safely back in school.

Had they known it, they had no need to worry, for their would-be captor had watched their flight down the avenue without disguising his satisfaction.

"All clear, Black," he said to the man who had made a speedy reappearance. "I don't think those two will trouble us again!"

ingly, "have all borne out this grudge against Pauline. He made Sylvia chum up with her, and then he and his servants league together to make his awful dog almost tear and devour our unhappy friend——"

The "unhappy friend", was by now able to grin amiably at the reference.

"And all to-night's events," she continued, "have merely added to the certainty that he particularly objects to Pauline for some reason or other. This scrap of paper," she said, holding up the yellowed fragment which Frederica had retrieved from the hall floor, "which bears the name of 'Cynthia Cavendish Harrington', and has obviously dropped out of the back of the picture when it was being removed from its frame, naturally makes me think there is some family connexion. My reading of the problem is this"—Beryl's voice took on an impressive note, and, in spite of themselves, her three listeners leaned forward with more interest than they had intended to display—"I think," said Beryl, "that Sir John is an impostor. That Pauline is the rightful heir to Rainley House, and all its vast possessions—if there are any;"—she interpolated in an ordinary tone—"that Sir John knows this, and—the villain!—is doing his best to harm and discredit her, even to the extent of letting his hound devour her! What do you think of that as a solution of the mystery?"

There were groans of disapproval on all sides.

A Wrenched Ankle

had used the car in the evening himself, which was unusual."

"Exactly," and Pauline smiled sweetly. "that's just the point. And what I want to get at is that probably why he used the car was to take Sylvia somewhere, and I've been thinking that I've a fairly good idea where that somewhere was."

The three listeners made no attempt now to disguise their interest. "You know how little rain we've had lately," Pauline went on, "and how dry all the roads are. Yet Jim Rawlins said that with the slight shower that night the car was in a dreadful mess—or at least his sister told Beryl that he said so. Well, doesn't that convey anything to you?"

Frederica looked wise. "I think so," she said slowly. "You mean that the only road that would have been at all likely to be muddy at that time is——"

"The road to the old mill!" finished L. excitedly. "Of course, the ground's always marshy near there, even in dry weather!"

Pauline nodded. "Quite right, and needless to say, if he went up the road to the old mill there's only one place where Sylvia can be."

"In the old mill?" queried Beryl in shocked tones.

"That's what I think," said Pauline, "and I think it's up to us to make sure. For if that poor kid is being kept a prisoner there, and that idiotic Sir John seems capable of doing

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anything, the sooner we rescue her the better."

"But how can she be a prisoner?" Lyn demurred, "if she was the girl in the dormitory to-night?"

"If," Pauline pointed out. "No, I hastened to add as the other's face little resentfully, "I'm not doubting *thought* it was Sylvia, but you admit you couldn't be sure. Certainly, the envelope has gone from my box, looks as if it had been she, though I wanted to take it away after giving it to her. I really can't understand. In any case the old mill will have to be investigated—she dropped her voice to a whisper going to go there to-night."

The other three looked blank.

"To-night! When—how?" came the inquiry.

"I shall have to wait till everything is over and Miss Griffiths is past—then I'll go here, and through this window—you know you did it once, Lyn, for the midnight bell in the other house. It's a very short way to go down, and there's a rope pipe to hang on to."

"Of course, I'm coming with you in a decided tone."

"Me too," said the others in chorus.

Pauline laughed. "I thought she said," and I admit I shall not be afraid. We're taking a fearful

in a good cause, and, with luck, Laidy will never know. By the way," and she looked cheerfully at Frederica, "Sir John certainly can't have rung her up or she'd have sent for us by this time. So that's something to be thankful for."

"There's another!" said Beryl, rising as the supper bell clanged. "All this excitement is making me positively ravenous!"

Had Miss Laidlaw had the slightest suspicion as she switched off her reading-lamp that night, about half-past ten, that four of her pupils were at that moment approaching the deserted and desolate old mill, she would certainly not have slept so peacefully as she did. Mercifully, however, no such knowledge troubled her, and in the meantime the four truants went briskly on their way, inwardly congratulating themselves on having made their escape so easily.

It was a very dark night, and the marshy roads made very heavy going, but luckily it was familiar territory to them all, and in consequence they were able to avoid some of the more difficult parts by making simple detours.

It was on one of those occasions while they were diverging from the main road that Frederica gave a warning 'Hist!' and they had to crouch down among the tall reeds that flanked the path.

"What is it?" Beryl whispered, but next moment they all heard what Frederica's sharper ears had caught first.

Footsteps were hurrying—as they came

nearer they realized that they were not hurrying, they were *running*—down the road.

The girls scarcely dared to breathe as footsteps drew abreast of, then passed, hiding-place, but strain their eyes as they could not make out any shape in the darkness and presently the sound too of the hurrying steps died away.

"Do you think it could have been that Sir John?" whispered Lyn, voicing the thought in all their minds.

"Well, if it was, the sooner we get on and see if we can find Sylvia the better," answered Frederica, with a note of grimness in her voice. These hurrying footsteps had added a quality of terror to their night's adventure which hitherto been absent.

Such was the pitchy darkness of the night that they were practically on the old mill building when they saw it—a slightly more solid blackness than the blackness around them.

"No lights showing," murmured Frederica. "We'll have to go warily. Have your torches ready for emergencies, Pauline!"

With the knowledge born of long familiarity with the place, they made their way round the side of the old building where usually a door creaked to and fro on a rusty hinge. Right to their relief they found it still creaking and holding their breath with excitement, not a little fear, they crept in, and up the brick steps. Half-way up they all stopped and

and listened. On the floor above, something had moved! It was not a clearly defined movement—more a shuffling, scuffling sound—but the next moment there came something else. A groan—a nerve-racking, hollow groan, sounding from immediately above them! With one accord the girls turned and fled down the steps again, and stood trembling by the door.

Once more Frederica recovered her nerve first. There was nothing languid about her voice now.

"We're being a lot of funks," she said crisply. "We came here to see if we could find Sylvia and as soon as we hear a sound, we turn and bolt."

"But that—that groan didn't sound a bit like Sylvia," Lyn demurred with chattering teeth.

"Nonsense!" retorted Frederica in her most matter-of-fact tones; "you can't possibly tell from a groan! Let me have your torch, Pauline and I'll go up and see. You others can wait here if you like."

"That, of course, they quite definitely couldn't do. Frederica must not be allowed to ascend to that terrifying upper region alone, so screwing up the last remnants of their courage they followed her once more up the stair.

Once again, as they ascended, there came the odd shuffling sound followed by the dreadful groan, and once again they paused. This time it was Beryl who put forward a suggestion.

"Why not let's shout 'Who's there?'" she whispered, "and see what happens? It would

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be better than putting our heads right lion's mouth as it were."

In the eerie torchlight which seemed strong enough to throw up the unfeatures of their surroundings—the cold green with damp, and the rafted roof of great wooden beams festooned with flapping webs—Frederica considered this suggestion finally approved. "Good idea!" she answered. "I'll shout;" and next minute her cry, "anybody there?" went echoing through the building. In the second that followed Lyn and Pauline clutched each other's hands for support. Was no answer going to come! If the silence and "nothingness" continued thought she would scream. And nothing happened! No answering hail came from above.

"I don't care," said Frederica at last doggedly. "I'm going up. There *must* be somebody and anyhow there are four of us," and while waiting for a reply she continued the search. The others had no choice but to follow.

At the top of the stairs Frederica paused at a door on the right-hand side. "The light must have come from here," she whispered, and, as once more Pauline and Lyn clutched each other convulsively, she turned the handle.

At first, as the door opened, the light from the torch seemed to shine upon an empty room. Even the intrepid Frederica felt that this was more than she could stand, and then, as automat

she turned the light round on the various parts of the room, it fell upon a huddled form lying in a corner near the fireplace. All four girls exclaimed simultaneously, and tiptoed into the room with a horrid questioning feeling in their minds.

The huddled shape was lying so oddly still, making no move as they approached—but one thing was certain, whoever it might be, it was not Sylvia! Next moment Frederica had set their fears at rest, for she bent down beside the still figure to look up with a relieved smile next moment.

"Pulse all right," she assured them. "Whoever he is, he's just unconscious."

Just with that the figure stirred, tried to move, and emitted one of the heart-rending groans which had so unnerved them on the stairs, following which he opened his eyes and gazed wonderingly at the four girls.

Suddenly, recollection seemed to come upon him.

"Did Sylvia get help so soon?" he demanded.

The question acted like a tonic on his four listeners. The reference to Sylvia, the cultured tones of the voice itself, all had a reassuring quality of which they had stood badly in need.

"We'll help you," said Frederica kindly, "but please, who are you?"

By this time, with their assistance, the man had struggled to a sitting position, and Beryl, searching round the room, had found and dragged forward an old chair against which he might lean.

CHAPTER IX

Even Headmistresses are Curious

Never in the annals of Heatherley School had the Headmistress's study presented such a scene as it did at four o'clock the next morning.

It had been after midnight when Beryl and Lyn, on their quest for help, had met and stopped the motor car containing Miss Laidlaw, and Dr. Warrender, whom she had summoned on Sylvia's advice, Sylvia herself who had insisted on coming, and the gardener, who had been roused and included in the party in case the doctor should need assistance in helping Sir John to the car. Beryl and Lyn had been packed hurriedly into the back seat as Miss Laidlaw could not countenance their returning the whole way to school alone. Miss Laidlaw, indeed, was in a state almost verging on nervous prostration, at the mere thought of four of her pupils being abroad at that time of night at all, no matter what the cause. She had had wisdom enough, however, to refrain from comment until a more fitting time.

Now, however, as she looked round her study at the four truants and Sylvia, all seeming none

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the worse of their adventure, she deemed that that time had come. Also, like her four erring pupils, she was feeling not a little curiosity about the real state of affairs.

Sir John, who had proved to be suffering from nothing worse than a badly wrenched ankle, had been taken home by Dr. Warrende who also had obviously been consumed by curiosity over the situation. A little flicker passed over Miss Laidlaw's face as she thought that probably the doctor was even now questioning his patient in much the same way as she was going to question her pupils.

There was, however, no trace of a smile as she turned towards them.

"Now, girls," she said, with a quite perceptible edge to her voice, "I feel that I am entitled to an explanation of your quite extraordinary conduct."

Beryl who had been lulled into a sense of false security by the steaming cocoa and lavish slices of cake with which Miss Laidlaw had up till then been plying them, choked over a crumb in her sudden realization that the worst was yet to come, and caused a diversion for quite two minutes longer, much to Miss Laidlaw's annoyance. Peace being once more restored, the Headmistress was again going to speak when Frederica broke in:

"If you please, Miss Laidlaw," she said apologetically, "I think Sylvia ought to tell story first, because, even if we tell what we

know, it won't make anything any clearer, for we're completely in the dark about the real meaning of the things we've been mixed up in. And we'd really frightfully like to know what it's all been about!" she added with a note of appeal.

As Miss Laidlaw's own feelings were entirely in accord with this she immediately agreed.

"Well, Sylvia," she said questioningly, "what have you to say?"

Sylvia looked very small and shy, as all eyes turned in her direction, but there was nothing sullen about her expression now. The girls realized what they had not realized before, that she was extremely pretty.

She seemed to be casting about in her mind for a beginning.

"I—well, of course, you know that the first Sir John was not my real grandpapa," she began, in a hesitating voice; "the Sir John whom you met to-night is the real one. The other horrid one was really his valet, and that woman, whom you met," she said, turning to Pauline, "who had really been my nurse, was also his wife.

"We lived very quietly abroad, scarcely ever saw anyone, and Grandpapa made a great friend of Jacobs—that is the valet's name—treating him, you know, not as a servant at all, and that, I think, is what caused all the trouble. I've heard him tell Jacobs repeatedly about how some day he must go back to Rainley House, and of the wonderful pictures he had

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the worse of their adventure, she deemed that that time had come. Also, like her four erring pupils, she was feeling not a little curiosity about the real state of affairs.

Sir John, who had proved to be suffering from nothing worse than a badly wrenched ankle, had been taken home by Dr. Warrender, who also had obviously been consumed by curiosity over the situation. A little flicker passed over Miss Laidlaw's face as she thought that probably the doctor was even now questioning his patient in much the same way as she was going to question her pupils.

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"We lived very quietly abroad, scarcely ever saw anyone, and Grandpapa made a great friend of Jacobs—that is the valet's name—treating him, you know, not as a servant at all, and that, I think, is what caused all the trouble. I've heard him tell Jacobs repeatedly about how some day he must go back to Rainley House, and of the wonderful pictures he had

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there, and wonderful antiques. And I remember one night in particular when he said: 'About the first visit I'll have to pay, when I go back to Rainley, Jacobs, is to the girls' school there. I'm the chief governor, if I remember rightly,' and he laughed tremendously over it, and told me he wanted me to be a pupil there. I think," and Sylvia looked shyly at Miss Laidlaw, "Grandpapa was really rather proud of being a governor, but, of course, he treated it as a joke, and it was his mentioning it to Jacobs that gave him the idea of coming here that night. I'm going a little too quickly though," she said, and paused for a moment.

"All of a sudden Grandpapa was taken ill," she continued. "I—I think," and a shocked note crept into her voice, "that Jacobs and his wife had something to do with it, they must have given him some kind of drug; but although I begged them, they would not get a doctor, and then they told me that they felt the only thing that would help him would be to get back to Rainley House. Of course, I was pleased, but from the moment we started on the journey I realized something was wrong. I was not allowed to speak to anyone, and I distinctly heard Jacobs passing himself off as Sir John Harrington—he is like him in height and build, and so few people have met Grandpapa in recent years that he had no difficulty in pretending to be him.

"When we came here the same thing hap-

ned. There were no servants in the house except a man, Black, who seemed to know all about the conspiracy, and who had a most dreadful dog."

All four girls shivered reminiscently, and Sylvia gave an appreciative smile.

"Grandpapa was locked up in a room, and was not allowed out of doors, until that dreadful evening when I was taken over here. Jacobs then told me with the most awful threats that I must pretend he was Grandpapa, and I was so frightened I had to promise.

"I overheard him discussing how he would behave, and he was laughing and saying he'd act so queerly that he'd put any of the girls from coming 'sneaking about the grounds'. These were his actual words, and, of course, you remember how odd his behaviour was. He certainly at the end said he made you all free of his grounds, but I think he felt pretty sure that nobody would come, and in any case the front gates were always locked, and he kept that horrible dog roaming about most of the time."

Pauline could restrain her curiosity no longer.

"But why did he fasten on me that night, and then invite me to tea with you next day, and then let me be chased by that awful dog?" she queried, the questions tumbling out one after the other.

"It was your name—Cavendish," Sylvia explained. "I could see it gave him quite a

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shock, for he had thought he had only me to deal with, and now here were you, probably a relative, and you might see through the whole thing, so he was as terrifying as possible. Then, when we got home and he told his wife about it, she was more worried still, and suggested the plan of inviting you the following day, and frightening you so badly that you would never come back. I just heard about the inviting part—I had no idea of what was going to happen afterwards—and I pretended to be sulky about it, though all the time I was delighted. I made up my mind I'd tell you all about it if I could get the chance, but, to be on the safe side, I wrote about it and hid the envelope on the ridge inside the fireplace."

"But why didn't you tell me about it all the time we were coming from school, or why didn't you tell me to read what was in the envelope when you gave it to me?" put in Pauline curiously.

Sylvia shuddered. "I was terrified," she admitted. "Jacobs made me promise that I wouldn't say a word to you, and swore that if I did, he'd be sure to find it out. He did find out later about the envelope, and he and his wife almost went mad. By that time I was supposed to have a chill and not to be able to go to school—he wouldn't risk letting me talk to you again—and I think Jacobs and his wife became really frightened that things were going to be found out before they could get away."

"The first I knew that anything different was going to happen was when Jacobs came and seized me roughly and said: 'We've had enough of you and your spying. We'll put you and your precious grandpapa, for the night, where you won't trouble us,' and almost immediately I found myself being bundled into the back seat of that old car which he hired from the hotel, and to my surprise I found Grandpapa bundled there too, but he seemed too ill to speak.

"Well, as I expect you've guessed, he drove us to that deserted old mill, and locked poor Grandpapa in one room, and me in the one next to it, and left us, jeering, 'Perhaps I'll leave word to have you rescued to-morrow, or the next day, if we are clear away by that time—but perhaps not!'

"It was awful being locked up there—the whole place was so old and dirty, and try as I would I couldn't get out. The window had iron bars across it, and though I shouted and shouted to Grandpapa, he must have been too ill to hear me.

"And then, as I kept rattling and tugging at the door, sometimes throwing my weight against it, sometimes pulling with all my strength, I had an amazing piece of luck. The lock must have been so old and rotten that it could not stand the strain. I heard a snap, and next moment I was free.

"I had more luck too, for Jacobs had left the key of grandpapa's door in the lock, and all

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I had to do was to turn it and go in, but Grand papa was unconscious and I could not rouse him."

Sylvia paused and looked round at the others deprecatingly.

"It seems a terribly silly thing now," she said, "because, of course, what I should have done was to come here at once for help. Instead of that, the one thing that was uppermost in my mind was my terror of Jacobs, and what he might do if by any chance Pauline had read my letter and given him away.

"Suddenly, it seemed desperately important that I should get back that envelope from Pauline by hook or by crook, or I felt sure that something awful would happen to us. I ran back to school here, and slipped in the back stairs, and found my way to the dormitory which Pauline had shown to me as the one where she slept; and once more I had tremendous luck, for in Pauline's cubicle her blazer was lying, and in the pocket was my letter, unopened. I was only just in time to get it and slip out, for somebody came in to the dormitory almost immediately."

"That was us," said Beryl and Lyn together ungrammatically, "and we had come to see if we could get the envelope, too. And I was right," added Lyn, "I was sure it was you whom I had seen slipping out by the other door."

Sylvia flushed. "If I had only not been so stupid," she said, "I could have had help then.

However, it's no use thinking about that now. What I did was to slip out and hurry back to the old mill, although by that time I hated entering it, the light was growing so shadowy and I was terrified that Jacobs might have returned. What I did find, however, to my great joy, was that Grandpapa had recovered consciousness and was able to speak to me.

"He knew so little about what had been happening, and his mind was so befogged, that I could hardly get him to understand at first that Jacobs was taking his place and pretending to be him. When at last he did understand, however, it roused him completely.

" 'The scoundrel,' he exclaimed, 'it's my pictures he's after. Little did I think when I talked to him about them that this was what it would lead to. Come along, Sylvia, we must get back and prevent this. I only hope we shall be in time,' and he struggled to rise to his feet but he was so weak that he stumbled and wrenched his ankle so painfully that he fainted again.

"I was afraid to leave him until he came to again, but when he did he urged me to go for help, and so I set off again, this time in the pitch darkness, for by that time it was after ten. And—well—the rest I think you know, although cannot understand how you girls came to be on the spot so luckily," she concluded.

The other girls' stories, however, were soon told, and Miss Laidlaw listened with even

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increasing horror to their roamings and adventurings.

"I shall have to speak to you seriously about this again," she admonished them; "but let me once and for all impress upon you that, in any difficulty, the sensible thing is to come and ask my advice. If you had done so at the beginning, think of all the trouble and worry which might have been saved. Promise me that you will never again be so foolish!"

Very solemnly they promised.

"And now——" Miss Laidlaw began, but Frederica interrupted.

"But, Miss Laidlaw," she said almost tearfully, "has nothing been done to stop that horrid Jacobs from going off with the pictures, after all?"

Miss Laidlaw laughed.

"Of course," she said. "It was almost the first thing I did when Sylvia told me. I rang up the police station and told them to detain the inmates of Rainley House, as the man claiming to be Sir John was an impostor. They were inclined to pooh-pooh the idea at first, but when I explained who was 'phoning"—Miss Laidlaw's voice assumed its most 'Head-mistressish' expression—"they assured me the matter would be attended to at once. Whether they were successful, of course, I do not yet know."

Frederica heaved a sigh of relief, but this time it was Pauline who broke in:

"There's one thing still puzzling me," she said, "and that's why you left me that note in the fireplace, telling me to look at the picture in the hall—the one that had been removed?" she said, addressing Sylvia.

The latter looked puzzled.

"Had it been removed?" she asked. "He must have started as soon as he got Grandpapa and me out of the road, only you and Frederica would interrupt him. I—I told you to look at it," she added shyly, "because it was so like you. I think you must be related to us even though you don't think so."

Beryl burst out laughing.

"What about my story now?" she began. "My solution to the mystery? I told you Sir John was an impostor, and Pauline probably the missing heir——"

But Miss Laidlaw held up her hand. "No more to-night," she said firmly; "or rather, this morning. You will all sleep in the sick-room to-night, and, of course, you will not attend morning school. Come along, and I shall see you settled upstairs."

Realizing for the first time how tired they were, the girls tiptoed quietly after Miss Laidlaw, and soon, forgetful of the eventful hours through which they had passed, were blissfully asleep.

CHAPTER X

Heatherley visits Sir John

A week later saw the final explanation of the mystery.

Pauline, Frederica, Beryl, and Lyn had been invited over to Rainley House for the afternoon and were now sitting round a crackling fire, which took the chill out of the late October air, talking eagerly to Sylvia and Sir John.

Sir John, looking very different from the wreck he had been a week before, though still showing traces of illness, was talking.

"I feel I must be very grateful," he said, "to you young people, for I'm quite sure if it hadn't been for your interference, and desire to help Sylvia, Jacobs would have kept up his impersonation considerably longer than he did."

"And have you really recovered all your belongings, Sir John?" asked Beryl eagerly.

Sir John smiled. "All of them," he answered. "Jacobs and his wife and the man, Black, who was in the plot, had made their escape by the time the police reached here after Miss Laidlaw's warning, but they were intercepted on their way to London and everything was

recovered." Sir John hesitated. "I haven't charged them, though," he said, "and I'm not going to."

The girls looked their surprise, and he laughed in the jolly way they were beginning to appreciate.

"I liked the fellow," he said, half-apologetically; "and the more Sylvia tells me of his famous appearance at your school, the more amused I feel. He was clever, you know, tremendously so. I expect that's why I always treated him as I did, but I never dreamed that he would put my reputation for eccentricity to such account. He almost deserved to get off with it, though I can't help wondering how Miss Laidlaw and you all were deceived."

"It was terribly convincing," said Lyn earnestly. "We were all shaking in our shoes for him, and we were simply heart-sick for Pauline."

Sir John turned and looked quizzically at Pauline.

"Yes," he said, "I don't wonder that Jacobs got a bit of a shock when he heard your name, and saw you, especially as he must have been making a study of the pictures, Cynthia Cavendish Harrington's among them. It must have been a blow to him to realize he had still another enemy in the camp."

"But——" began Pauline protestingly.

Once more Sir John laughed. "You see, he didn't quite know everything—that the

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to them. By the way," he added, "do justice to Jacobs and tell you that even the beast has been trained never to touch body, so he wouldn't have harmed you. He was merely trying to frighten you all coming about the grounds, while he was with his little escapades."

The girls laughed.

"He wouldn't have had much difficulty," said Frederica, "with that wild beast prying about!"

There was a moment's silence, then P said dreamily: "Only about a fortnight ago we were saying how boring things were!"

"And now they'll be awfully flat and lamented Frederica.

"I think Miss Laidlaw, for one, will be glad to have you settled down once more," commented Sir John.

Five pairs of eyes viewed him coldly.

"Of course!" replied Beryl, making him spokesman. "But what else could you expect from a Headmistress?"

